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AUTHOR Davis, Ken
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ABSTRACT

The best art experience has often been characterized as a kind of balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the expected and the unexpected, the easy and the hard. Good directors and actors have the artistry to be able to play on the orientation reactions of the audience. They know how to structure a production or performance so that it alternately creates and reduces tension--surprising or confusing audience members, then allowing them to relax and reflect. The principle of flow occurs when a participant's skills are matched evenly to challenges; if skill exceeds challenge, boredom results. If challenge exceeds skill, anxiety results. The theatre experience presents challenges in the form of great quantities of sensory data. To meet these challenges, audience members bring skills of perception and, especially, organization. If these skills are unbalanced, they have the same effect on the theatre experience that they have on other activities; i.e., they produce boredom or anxiety. Ideal playgoers learn to overcome these undesirable results by symbolically restructuring the situation, either by narrowing their focus to avoid overload of sensory data and anxiety or by broadening their perspective and setting new problems for themselves to increase the challenge. (CRH)

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Ken Davis
Department of English
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506

Skills and Challenges:
Playgoing as "Flow" Experience

(Presented at annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Denver, November 20, 1983)

To be a good playgoer is to be part of a balancing act: the best art experience has often been characterized as a kind of balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the expected and the unexpected, the easy and the hard. Descartes, for example, wrote:

> Among the sense-objects the most agreeable to the soul is neither that which is perceived most easily nor that which is perceived with the greatest difficulty; it is that which does not quite gratify the natural desire by which the senses are carried to the objects, yet is not so complicated that it tires the senses" (13).

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More recently, the psychologist D. E. Berlyne has described this balance as one between "diversity" and "uniformity," with the former creating tension in the mind of the viewer and the latter reducing it. Maintaining this balance between tension and its moderation is, to a great extent, the job of the artist. As Berlyne writes, "Artistry means playing on the orientation reactions of the audience, switching them on and off, building them up and assuaging them" (246).

Good directors and actors have just this kind of artistry. They know how to structure a production or a performance so that it alternately creates and reduces tension, surprising or confusing audience members, then allowing them to relax and reflect. When directors talk about "pace" or "timing" in the theatre, they usually mean just this.

But a work of art is not the product of the artist alone, but grows out of the transaction between the work and its audience. So the audience, too, has to maintain the balance between tension and its resolution, seeking the challenge of the unfamiliar and making it familiar with knowledge and perceptual skill. Donald Arnstine describes this process as a kind of problem-solving. He writes:

> When one deliberately continues to attend to some pattern that has inhibited his expectations, in the hope that such continued attention will bring resolution . . . one has set a problem for himself in an aesthetic context. . . . Once

> the problem is set up, it is solved--if it is solved at all--by one's continued and deliberate attention to what is presented ("Art Experience" 325-26).[1]

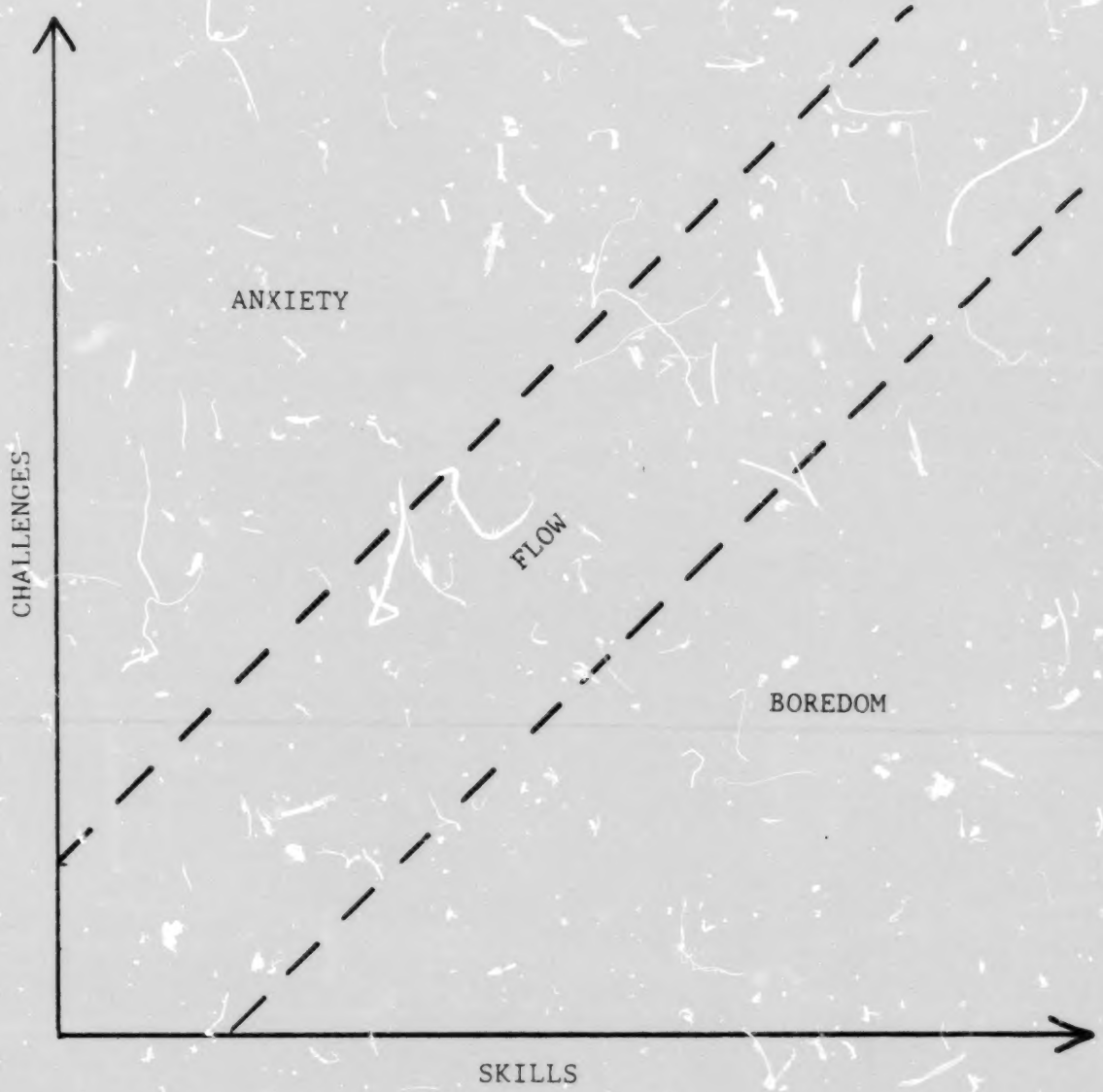
The "Flow" Model

The relationship of knowledge to the art experience has been much debated, but one useful approach to this relationship is suggested by the work of the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. After studying a number of activities that people do for their own sake--from rock climbing to rock dancing--Csikszentmihalyi observes that such activities all present challenges to be overcome by the participant. As diagramed in Figure 1, if the challenges exceed the participant's skill, the result is anxiety; if the reverse, the result is boredom. If, however, skills and challenges are evenly matched, the result is the intrinsically rewarding experience that Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow."

[Figure 1 about here]

While the levels of skills and challenges can to some extent be measured objectively, they are much more a function of the participant's <u>perception</u> of the situation. "To change a boring situation into one that provides its own rewards does not require

Davis, Figure 1



money or physical energy," writes Csikszentmihalyi; "it can be achieved through symbolic restructuring of information" (xiii). Specifically,

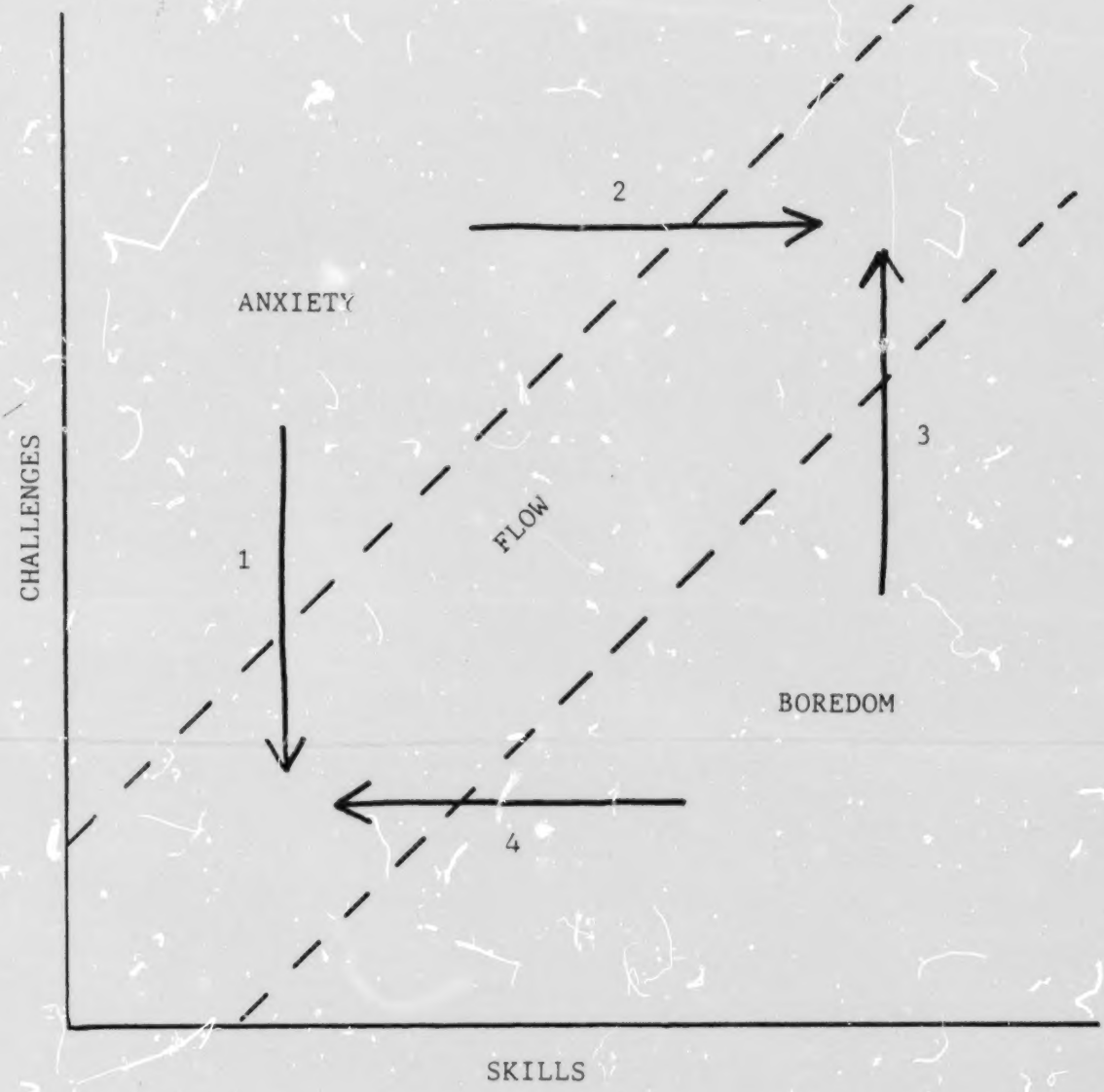
> People in a state of worry can return to flow through an almost infinite combination of two basic vector processes: decreasing challenges or increasing skills. . . . If they choose the latter, the resulting flow state will be more complex because it will involve more opportunities and a higher level of capabilities. Conversely, if one is bored one can return to flow either by finding a means to increase environmental challenges or by handicapping oneself and reducing the level of skills. The second choice is then less complex than the first (52-53).

These four "vectors"--ways of returning to flow--are diagramed in Figure 2, numbered in the order Csikszentmihalyi mentions them. Arrow 1 shows a movement from anxiety to flow by means of decreasing challenges; Arrow 2 shows a movement from anxiety to flow by means of increasing skills. Arrow 3 shows a movement from boredom to flow by means of increasing challenges; Arrow 4 shows a movement from boredom to flow by means of decreasing skills.

[Figure 2 about here]

For examples of these four vectors, consider--as

Davis, Figure 1-2



Csikszentmihalyi does--a chess player. Faced repeatedly with superior opponents, a chess player's challenges will exceed her skills, and she may become anxious. This anxiety can be changed to flow if (Arrow 1) she seeks weaker opponent or her strong opponents handicap themselves, thus reducing her challenge level, or if (Arrow 2) she studies to become a better player, thus increasing her skill level. Faced, on the other hand, with inferior opponents, her skills will exceed her challenges, and she may become bored. This boredom can be changed to flow if (Arrow 3) she seeks stronger opponents, thus increasing her challenge level, or if (Arrow 4) she handicaps herself, thus decreasing her skill level.

Going with the Flow

The theatre experience may be of this kind. The very word for a theatre event--play--suggests a kinship with the other kinds of play Csikszentmihalyi describes. One very good book on the theatre experience, Samuel Selden's Theatre Double Game, is based entirely on this kinship. The theatre experience, says Selden, is a contest in the audience member's mind:

> The playgoers have come to the playhouse with a desire to find there a way to combat certain undesirable thoughts or feelings (or even a lack of thought or feeling) and they are expecting the craftsman to help them do this. So the play assumes the form of a game of struggle, but a game

> stimulated and guided by the playmakers for the playgoer's benefit (13).

Theatre surely presents challenges, in the form of great quantities of sensory data. John Mason Brown described theatre as "a sort of circus which boasts more rings in simultaneous action have ever been shown under one Big Tent" (23-24), and John Styan observes that

> even at the level of clothes and paint and noise, the theatre bombards its audience with a hundred simultaneous capsules of information, anything capable of reaching the mind and imagination through the eye or the ear (Drama, Stage and Audience 4).

To meet these challenges, audience members bring skills of perception and, especially, organization. As Styan, again, notes:

> Drama, as no other art, uses man's capacity for piecing together vast amounts of sense information with which to build patterns for thinking and acting, just as in life. The spectator is required to organize the information until it grows, Kenneth Boulding would say, into large and complex images (Drama, Stage and Audience 27).

If these skills and challenges are unbalanced, they have the same effect on the theatre experience that they have on other activities. When audience members perceive too little in the

performance--when they are perceptually "overqualified" for the task given them by the performance--they become bored. When, on the other hand, they perceive too much--without the ability to interpret or organize it--they become anxious or frustrated.

For examples of both responses, consider the reactions of New York theatre critics to the 1956 Broadway premiere of Beckett's Waiting for Godot. John Chapman, writing in the Daily News, seems to have had the first response: finding little of substance in the play, he characterizes it as a "novelty," a "stunt" (322). Robert Coleman, of the Daily Mirror, takes a similar position: Godot, he writes, "has a surface sheen, but little real depth." And he quotes, not disapprovingly, those who regard the play as "a boring hoax" (321).

Other critics seem to have had the second response. Brooks Atkinson, in the Times, calls the play "a mystery wrapped in an enigma," with "no simple meaning" (319), and Walter Kerr writes in the Herald Tribune that Godot is "piled high" with "suggestions: suggestions that two tramps are two disparate but inseparable aspects of individual man, suggestions that can be read variously and furiously as Christian, existentialistic, or merely stoic allegories. The hints fly in all directions" (320).

Several aestheticians have remarked, in other terms, on this phenomenon. Berlyne, for example, writes that "departing too far from an intermediate degree of arousal potential, upsetting the

balance between the factors that raise arousal and the factors that allay arousal, results in discomfort" (233). Harold Osborne notes that "frustration may occur either because the object is not suitable to sustain aesthetic interest or because we are not adequately equipped to apprehend that particular object aesthetically" (18). And Arnstine writes:

> If a perceived pattern develops just as we expected it to, it no longer holds our attention; interest disappears and we turn to other things. . . . If on the other hand, we are exposed to a pattern with which we have no familiarity at all, or the development of which eludes our efforts to find any organization in it, then we either ignore it . . . or become anxious or frustrated about it ("Aesthetic Qualities" 36-37).

Ideal playgoers learn to overcome these undesirable results by doing what Csikszentmihalyi prescribes: symbolically restructuring the situation. Finding themselves anxious, bombarded with sensory data that seem to exceed their perceptual skills, seasoned playgoers (Arrow 1) decrease the sensory challenges by narrowing their focus to particular features of the production. They attend to just one character, perhaps, or just the set, or just the changes in lighting, thus blocking out much of the data overwhelming them: Atkinson and Kerr, for example, focus their Godot reviews on the acting of Bert Lahr. Or (Arrow 2) anxious playgoers "sit up" and pay more attention, engaging in

the performance more intensely and bringing more of their skills into play. While this second vector results in a richer, more complex theatre experience, either vector leads toward a flow state.

In the reverse situation, when insufficient challenges bring on boredom, ideal playgoers (Arrow 3) increase the challenge by broadening their perspective, setting new problems for themselves. Perhaps they deliberately seek to take in more features of the performance, considering, for example, the ways in which costuming contributes to characterization. Or perhaps they stop limiting their attention to the individual performance itself and begin relating it to other performances or even other life experiences. Alternatively (Arrow 4), playgoers can, in effect, decrease their skills, by "settling back" into a less critical posture. Even very sophisticated theatregoers sometimes admit to enjoying television soaps or sitcoms in just this way, finding it relaxing to "turn off" some of their usual playgoing skills. Again, either vector leads to flow, though, as Csikszentmihalyi points out, at different levels of complexity.

I do not mean to suggest that this psychological balancing act is always a conscious one; usually it is not. Adjusting skills and challenges to achieve flow is something we all do unconsciously most of the time. Nor do I mean to suggest that <u>any</u> theatre experience can be made as satisfying as any other. After all, the theatre experience is a transactional one, and the

transaction works both ways. For a given playgoer, a given performance may simply be too challenging or too unchallenging for any possibility of a flow state.

But I do suggest that watching a play is much more like driving your own car than it is like taking a bus trip. The motorist behind the wheel has less of a legitimate gripe against anxiety or boredom than the tourist on a bus excursion; the former has more control over the experience, and thus must share in the responsibility. While it seems fashionable among some playgoers to decry the poor quality of most performances they see, such people may be commenting as much on themselves as on the theatre. For an audience member is not entirely at the mercy of others; he or she can control--to some extent--the theatre experience so that more "flow" will result. And playgoers, it seems reasonable to suggest, should strive to enjoy more of what they see, not less. As Ronald Peacock says:

> The gradual extension of sympathy and curiosity naturally accompanies the process of living and learning, and a taste become more catholic by such assimilation is not a betrayal of character but an affirmation of a developing humanity (94).

Audience education--what I've elsewhere called "playgrounding" (Davis)--can help give the audience member the control to make that possible.

Flow and Illusion

Csikszentmihalyi's flow model may help explain one more fact of theatre: the illusion of reality it creates. The nature of this illusion has been debated more than any other aspect of theatre; the centuries-long controversy over the classical "unities," for example, centered on just this question. On one side are those who argued that successful theatre must be believed in; on the other are those like Samuel Johnson, who maintained that "spectators are always in their senses and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players" (xxvii).

Those who argue for belief in the performance seem to suggest that playgoers are "fooled" by the fact that theatre uses living, speaking people and the fact that theatre demands, as we have seen, the same perceptual skills used in everyday life. As a result of this "realism," it is argued, playgoers become oblivious to their surroundings, forgetting their own identities and becoming immersed in the action of the play.

What is often forgotten is that for many playgoers this feeling of total involvement doesn't seem to have anything to do with the realism of the performance; it can occur just as readily in a stylized version of, say, Mother Courage as in a naturalistic version of, say, The Wild Duck. As Styan says, "there is no essential difference between an artificial and a

realistic play" (Elements 235). Moreover, the same feeling of complete involvement can come when reading a novel, or playing chess, or dancing. So the "suspension of disbelief" that happens in good theatre is not unique to this medium but is precisely what Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow." Csikszentmihalyi writes that people in the flow state become totally engrossed in the experience and "temporarily forget their identity and its problems" (48).

This is not to deny the uniqueness of theatre; the fact that it does use human activity as its medium is important in many ways. But almost no modern playgoer "believes" in such activity, giving it the same status as everyday life. The involvement we feel in good theatre comes not from the medium itself, but from the way its challenges are matched by our skills. In this way, theatre is very different from everyday life, for everyday life often fails to provide this balance.

Coleridge, in fact, seems to take a similar position on the nature of theatrical illusion, especially in the implication that the theatre experience can be controlled, to some extent, by the playgoer. He writes that theatrical performances

> produce a sort of temporary half-faith, which the spectator encourages in himself and supports by a voluntary contribution on his own part, because he knows that it is at all times in his power to see the thing as it really is (412).

Coleridge, like Shakespeare, calls this activity of the playgoer "imagination." It's the activity that joins the audience member and the performer in the transaction that creates a play. "Playgrounding" serves, then, to educate the imagination--and, as its patron saint, Theseus, says to Hippolyta, speaking of the actors they are watching,

> If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men.

Note

[1] Keir Elam describes this activity as a decoding process. "However expert the spectator," he writes ". . . there is never a perfect coincidence between the producers' codes and the audience's codes." He continues, "For the spectator, the condition of 'undercoding'--of an incomplete or evolving apprehension of the producers' codes--will be more or less constant throughout the performance, and indeed much of the audience's pleasure derives from the continual effort to discover the principles at work" (95). And Thomas R. Whitaker notes, "Our relationship to the play, as to any act of communication, though always remaining incomplete and therefore partly obscure, is nevertheless telic: . . . it is oriented <u>toward</u> a more coherent

and complete understanding.. . . We begin . . . in relative diversity and confusion. But we can move toward harmony and clarity" (32-33).

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